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ABSTRACT

To help immigrant children succeed academically, the teacher must seek to ease the pain of the uprooting experience and find ways to awaken the power within the children to help themselves. This paper describes teaching experiences that led one teacher to understand immigrant children's psychology and the interventions necessary for giving self expression and voice to these children. The paper discusses a center for immigrant children of various cultures that the teacher ran in 1980. The children were taught to use art to express themselves through storytelling. The paper contends that, in the end, regardless of policies, philosophies, theories, and methodologies, the success or failure of an individual child and the way that child experiences school depends on what happens in that child's classroom, what kind of learning environment the teacher is able to provide, and how well the teacher is able to attend to the particular needs of that child. The paper questions what the relationship between psychology and language is, and summarizes major themes in addressing the inner world of the immigrant child. The four themes that form a foundation for work with immigrant children are: (1) the need for a nest, a classroom nest; (2) the necessity to examine language arts textbooks; (3) the necessity for early academic intervention; and (4) the need to explore art because it is the medium that connects psychology and language. Contains 9 references and several colored illustrations. (BT)

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Language and Psychological Dimensions:
The Inner World of the Immigrant Child

by Cristina Igoa, Ed.D.

American Education Research Association
Montreal, Canada - 1999

I would like to share with you today my observations and reflections on the psychology of the immigrant child; the thoughts, fears and needs that are contained if not imprisoned within the immigrant child as he or she wrestles to become a part of a new society. I want to show how the psychology of the immigrant child underlies progress and achievement in the child's academic and language development.

I myself was an immigrant child, and my research and work with nearly 300 immigrant children over 15 years have brought me to a deeper understanding of what it means for a child to be uprooted. When a child is in the home country, she is nested in her family and in a school that understands her culture. In being plucked from this nest and transplanted into a new country, with no voice and no choice in the matter, the immigrant child is faced with a formidable challenge. And even as she must struggle to grasp the complexities of the new language and culture, she is reeling from a combination of losses that leave her feeling diminished and inadequate.

Some immigrant children enter a classroom in which their culture and language is represented by other children with similar histories and backgrounds. The new child arrives and is embraced by her own cultural collective. Nevertheless, on a deeper level the child is painfully aware of being "different" in a new world whose inhabitants seem to ignore or even resent those who are "different." [1] Says a child from China:

This is a totally different environment than I have been used

to. The change is different because it upsets the kind of life I had. It was different back home. School was different, teachers were different.[2]

And then there is the one child; the single individual who is the sole representative of his or her own culture and language in the classroom. This child is in particular danger of being overwhelmed and drowning in someone else's culture as well as being numbed by feelings of loneliness and isolation. Said a boy from Afghanistan:

I felt hidden in the second grade because whenever anyone said something to me, I just couldn't answer a thing. When it was time for recess, I didn't have anyone to play with. The only person who played with me was my imagination.[3]

There is nothing more painful for a child than a feeling of non-existence.

To help immigrant children succeed academically, the teacher must find ways to ease the pain of the uprooting experience and find ways to awaken the power within the children to help themselves.

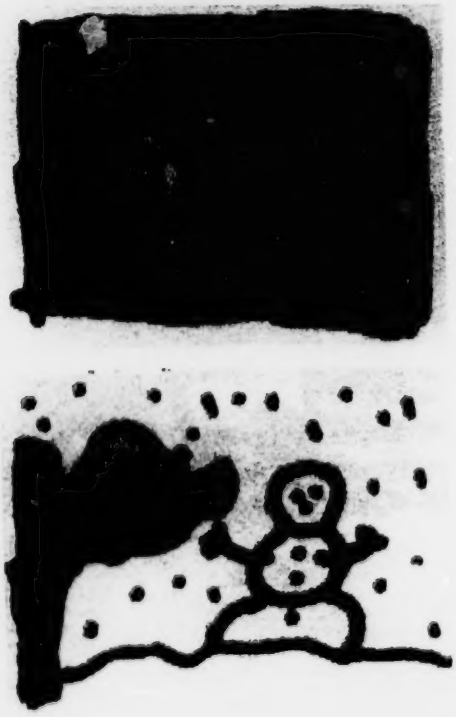
I have found that even before immigrant children can speak, if they are given opportunities to express themselves either verbally or nonverbally, children will tell us what they need if we would only listen.

I will share with you some of the research that led me to the understanding of the immigrant children's psychology and the interventions necessary for giving self-expression and voice to these children.

The First Center

In 1980 I ran a Center for 20 immigrant children of various cultures in which I taught them to use art to express themselves through storytelling. This art was then put into filmstrips with music and sound effects. One of the children I worked with was a 12-year-old boy from Mao's China who was silent for a year. The background information from a previous teacher described him as a problem, for he had not spoken to anyone for a year. The boy was not a problem; he was observing the world around him. He was a deeply introverted child plucked out of his Chinese nest - and he wondered how he could fit into a multicultural school setting. In his filmstories, he was finally able to reveal what was going on inside him.[4]

His first story spoke of helping a baby bird that had fallen from its nest. In the next story, he is chased by a tiger with staring yellow eyes, but is rescued when a friendly woman invites him in for cookies. In another story, he is chased by wolves, and again is rescued by a kind stranger. At the end of each story, he is very, very tired and goes to sleep.



Other children at the Center made film-strip stories also. A little Vietnamese girl wrote about a little egg in a nest in America, and a Chinese girl wrote about the upside-down world.

A Philippine girl created the character of a "lonely bear" who has no friends, but finally makes a friend by helping an injured squirrel.

Eight years later as part of my doctoral thesis, I found the children, now young men and women. They now had the language to help me break through the symbols of their stories. My conclusion from the research at the Center with these children was that they were full of pent-up fears, loneliness, hurt and confusion. These feelings needed an outlet for self-expression.

For example, the story of Rosario, "the lonely bear," disturbed me greatly. I now learned that her loneliness was far more than a passing feeling. In the goal of acquiring language, she had been moved from class to class and school to school so often that in seven years, she had never had a chance to make a friend or to bond with a teacher.

From a psychological perspective, when a child has no friends for seven years, she has no way to validate herself and will have difficulties in the relationships in the future. In addition, when she finally was able to make friends, she did not have the competence and confidence of language proficiency to follow her friends to college.

What Can A Teacher Do?

Those of us who work with children know that our task is

complicated; we have to examine the teaching practices we use, the policies we are expected to follow, the theories we adopt. In the end, regardless of policies, philosophies, theories, and methodologies, the success or failure of an individual child - the way that child experiences school - depends on what happens in that child's classroom, what kind of learning environment the teacher is able to provide, and how well the teacher is able to investigate and attend to the particular needs of that child.

What then is the relationship between psychology and language?

- One is the understanding of the child's inner world, his feelings, thoughts and needs and finding pedagogy to address those needs.

- The other is the way the child seeks connections with others through language and the use of language to succeed in school. When both are present, the child feels more whole and has a better chance to make it in school. The underlying fear of immigrant children is that they will never make it. They look to teacher to show them the way.

The children from the Center, now older, had broken the code of the underlying messages behind the symbols of their filmstrip stories, and from the insights and interpretations they provided, I was able to develop techniques to work with the children. The whole idea of the Lonely Bear, without friends and without the language necessary to help her make it to college haunted me. I was determined to find a way for these children.

I now will summarize the major themes in addressing the inner world of the immigrant child.

These four themes have been the foundation of my continuing research and work with immigrant children since 1991, along with pedagogical interventions that have helped me as a teacher address the themes. Let me share with you what I have learned and what the children have taught me.

I. These children need a nest. A classroom nest.

Uprooted children need a safe place to make mistakes; a warm and friendly environment with no fear of ridicule or shame to speak or to be silent. The nest is a place where every child's culture is valued; a place that makes it safe for the child to break out of a shell.

- It is a place to encourage peer bonding and study groups which help them overcome the fear that they can't make it in school;
- to have a buddy system to assist them to overcome their loneliness and isolation;
- to give them a place of belonging;
- to bring and share their cultural artwork and artifacts;
- to experience the beauty of their being different;
- to experience grief as part of the acculturation process;
- to have a home-school connection through the creation of home libraries.[5]

II. Necessity to examine Language Arts Textbooks

Once the children are nested and their psychological needs have been met, the focus turns to language literacy, which is equally important.

Recently in examining the Language Arts textbooks both for the "mainstream" students and the ESL students, I found that both sets of textbooks were written with the assumption that all the students arrived in the first grade and moved up collectively through to the sixth grade. The ESL language arts series contained the latest theories and interventions which are absolutely necessary for the students.

The mainstream students, if they moved collectively from grade 1 through grade 6 would have read 164 stories. However, as far as second language literacy was concerned, the sum total of stories the children were to read in six years was reduced from 164 to 31.

Could this disparity be a factor in the problem of the long term ESL student, like the Lonely Bear who never made it to college? I decided to do a study on this question with a classroom of immigrant children in 1991.

III. Necessity for early academic intervention

School systems are designed for students who begin at the 1st grade level and move up collectively. Immigrant children, however, come at

any time of the year, at any grade level, and from any country. They experience not only global mobility, but also interstate and intraschool mobility as their parents search for better living conditions and work.

In 1991 I taught in a classroom full of 5th and 6th grade immigrant children from eight countries speaking eleven languages. I found that the children had considerable gaps in their education. Evidence I collected showed that 28 out of 29 children could not read a 1st-grade English story, even after they had been in the country and the school system for two to five years. Sixteen of the children were from war-torn countries.[6]

I began their academic year with second language literacy. Starting from the ground up, pacing them carefully, I concentrated on closing the reading and writing gaps. The children read grade 1 level books and set the goal of completing the work in 2 to 3 months. By the end of two months, they moved up to grade level 2. They continued to move up one level every two months until, by the end of the year, they had nearly closed the gaps in literacy.

In the follow-up study the following year, 14 out of the 14 students, now in 7th grade, had GPAs between 3.0 and 4.0. Moreover, in a follow-up study five years later, I was able to locate 11 of these 14 students, and all 11 were on their way to college. Two had even been able to skip their senior year.

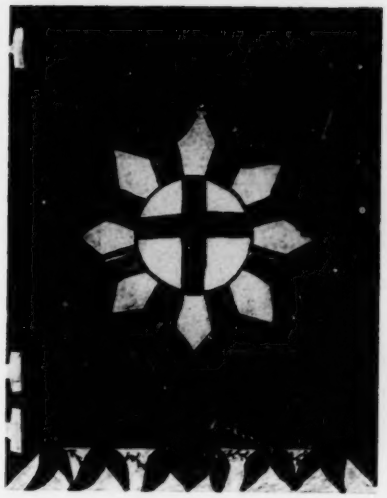
Remembering the Lonely Bear's sad experience, the outcome of this

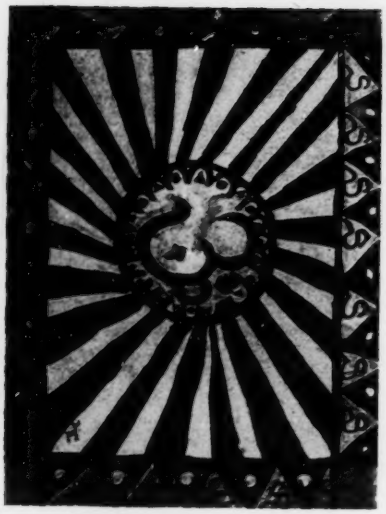
study reinforced my belief that academic intervention to close the gaps in literacy, preferably upon the child's arrival, is of utmost importance. Where there is a literacy gap, there are often gaps in the other subjects as well. However, literacy is the key to all other subjects. Once they have learned to read in their second language, they can read to learn in that language. A step in the process cannot be skipped. Thus, the development of literacy as well as the child's second language literacy is one of the most empowering academic interventions. These children have dreams of being successful in school and they need to be literate to achieve them.

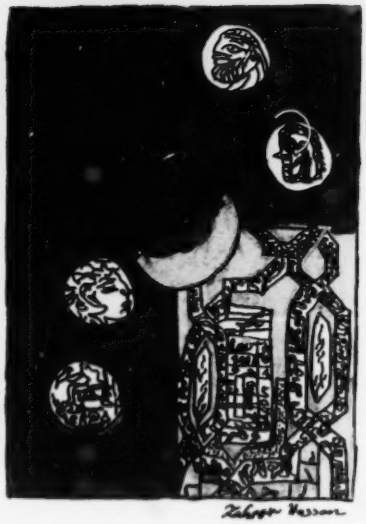
IV. Art is the medium that connects psychology and language

Art is a vibrant second language that is universally available to all human beings. Through art, immigrant children can communicate in more expressive and expansive ways than their oral and written language skills permit. Through art, the children stay in touch with their feelings, develop skills, use a medium for cultural expression, become visible and appreciate being "different."

Placing these individual cultural drawings in a circle, we walk around in silence and without comparing, the children accept what each has done as unique as it is beautiful. We applaud the difference.







Art is also a valuable means of expression for children traumatized by war. Some of these children have blocked energies that inhibit their ability to learn and to concentrate. Art is one way that children of war can channel their deep emotions into positive action and self-expression.[7]

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Symbolic art is also an expression of the child's whole self. Religion, so deeply embedded in culture, is often integrated in the art of the children who want the whole of who they are to be visible to the world. Deeper yet than the religious imagery is the abstract art which carries their cultural, their spiritual symbols as well as profound messages to the world.

A beautiful 12-year-old girl from Mexico wrestled with both Spanish and English, and as she strengthened her language, she used art as an outlet for her imagination, feelings and beliefs.

In translation from Spanish, she speaks:

> *At the center is the spirit of Mexico. It is where God lives and on either side are the cascades of our wishes and dreams. Underneath is our home surrounded by feathers of the Aztecs.*
>
> *If you enter the center of the home, it is because you have done something good with your life and you can connect with God. You can enter the center of the spirit where God lives and you can go out to see the people but the people cannot see you.*
>
> *Above, the sun shines behind the clouds. It shines on the bridge where the people cross. Behind the sun is*

the rainbow, the rainbow signifies that there will be no more rain nor thunder and life will be more tranquil. [9]

In conclusion, there is a direct relationship between psychology and language. If we listen to the immigrant children, they will teach us how to reach them.

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